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Soviet-British ties remain intact

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LONDON — It became known as the battle between the man with the teeth of iron and the Iron Lady.

It began on Sept. 11, when the British government announced that Oleg Gordievsky, the Soviet KGB chief in London, had defected to the West after working as a counteragent for the last 19 years.

It ended seven days later, when 31 Soviet citizens who the British said were spies were expelled from London. The same number of Britons working in Moscow — who the Soviets contended were spies — were expelled from the Soviet Union.

The tit-for-tat expulsions, coming just after several high-ranking West Germans defected to the East, were thought at the time to herald a severe crisis in British-Soviet relations. But now, almost two months later, it appears that the spy allegations have faded into history, leaving no long-lasting imprint on relations between the two nations.

"I don't think it's had any serious and lasting effect," a spokesman for the Foreign Office said recently. "If there was any effect, it was immediate, and is now behind us."

As evidence, the British government says Soviet Foreign Minister Edward Shevardnadze still plans to visit the United Kingdom soon. And a bilateral trade conference that was scheduled for late October has been postponed until next month, but only because of a change in personnel in the Soviet trade ministry.

"They could have canceled the trade talks as a matter of protest, but that was not done," said a spokesman at the Department of Trade and Industry.

In the beginning, for the British, the spy story was heady. Gordievsky certainly was the biggest catch in the defection game for some time. The Foreign Office said that because of his sensitive post in London, he "was in a position to know full details of Soviet intelligence activities and personnel in this country."

He first went abroad for the Soviet Union in 1966, stationed in Denmark, and it appears that he began working for the West at that time. He left Denmark in 1970, then returned and lived there from 1972 to 1978. He was

posted in Britain in 1982 as a counselor in the embassy, but really was working as a KGB official. He recently had been made head of the KGB's operations in London.

It is still unclear why he defected. Some theorized that his cover might have been blown by the defection in August of Hans Joachim Tiedge, a high-ranking official in the West German counterintelligence agency who fled to East Berlin. But others said Gordievsky's defection had been planned before Tiedge left the West.

In any case, Gordievsky's defection set off the wave of allegations and expulsions. Finally, Thatcher called a halt to it. "It's the man with the teeth of iron against the Iron Lady," one observer said at the time.

Since the defection, the British government has reduced the number of Soviets permitted here from 234 to 205. However, it has permitted the Soviet embassy staff to be increased from 39 to 46. Foreign Office officials said there are about 100 Britons in Moscow.